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Concluding comments



This book has sought to offer a comprehensive review of competitive strategies, and concomitant HRM practices in the international tourism and hospitality sector. It has painted a complex picture of the sector, and particularly the differing routes to competitive advantage which organizations may adopt. Clearly, the book has demonstrated that it is virtually impossible to entirely generalize the employment experience in tourism and hospitality. In particular, the extent to which organizations may be aspiring to best practice HRM remains a point worthy of further debate and research.

Clearly recognition of this point has a major impact on the nature of work, employment and people management in tourism and hospitality industry. In that sense from a HRM point of view, in crude terms, there is much evidence to support an approach in the tourism and hospitality sector to HRM which is more 'best fit' than 'best practice'. Marchington and Grugulis' (2000: 1121) view that 'best practice, it seems, is problematic' is certainly borne out by the tourism and hospitality sector. Much as policy-makers would like the sector to be characteristic of a high wage, high skill, high quality, high value-added approach, clearly the low and mixed skill context of the tourism and hospitality sector a more nuanced approach is called for. Large numbers of tourism and hospitality employers do not necessarily need to look to develop high value added approaches. As a consequence, high value added approaches have to be seen in relation to 'a broader package of environmental, cultural and structural features that can nurture and support high performance, high value added industries and sectors' (Keep and Mayhew, 1999: 4). These conditions do not exist universally across the tourism and hospitality sector and resultantly the 'best fit' approach of designing HRM practices which are contingent upon the particular customer definition of 'good service' would seem apposite. Notions of 'good service' will differ markedly across market segments and between tangible and intangible aspects of the tourism and hospitality product. Given this reality, practices which may be desirable to employees such as levels of high pay, extensive training and job security, are not necessarily cost effective for many tourism and hospitality organizations, a point which Riley et al. (2000) strongly advocate in their arguments about economic determinism. In this sense then the 'poor' personnel practices of tourism and hospitality organizations that are noted by a number of authors may reflect any number of reasons. However it is important to stress that there is still an element of choice for employers and claims to the immutability of 'poor' personnel practice should be treated with

some caution. As the DfEE (2000: 13) notes in describing employment practices in the sector:

Some of these deficiencies reflect labour market circumstances, commercial constraints and lack of awareness of options, but some reflect poor human resource management, unwillingness to take risks or invest in innovation and short termism: most vividly exemplified by the low pay, crisis management culture of the less impressive establishments.

Equally, though, there is clearly some evidence for good practice HRM in the tourism and hospitality industry and the book has sought to highlight such practices throughout. An obvious question stemming from this recognition of good practice, which we have sought to answer is: if best practice does exist, what does it look like? More often than not it is likely to be large, often multinational organizations who exemplify a number of the practices, as described by the likes of Hoque (2000) and illustrated by a number of examples in this book. Indeed, recognizing the nature of the small and medium enterprise (SME) sector it may well be that notions of best practice need to be reconfigured within this particular sector. As Worsfold (1999: 346) notes, 'In the case of small hotels we may need to abandon the search for formal HRM approaches and attempt to establish whether "caring management" can provide the "concern for employee well being" which appears to be linked to service quality.'

Generally, whilst this book concludes that the HRM strategies of firms are heavily shaped by contextual contingencies, including national, sectoral, organizational and occupational factors, and therefore are more redolent of best fit, such a conclusion does not necessarily invalidate best practice thinking. For example, Haynes (1999: 200) argues that in relation to best practice HRM in the hospitality sector:

Sometimes the critical verges on the hysterical ... In an industry characterized by relatively low levels of pay and high levels of arbitrary management practice, the adoption of many of the HRM practices in question would undoubtedly improve the work experience of hospitality workers. For that reason alone the model should not be rejected out of hand by hospitality researchers.

As Boxall and Purcell (2000: 1930) suggest '... there are certain broadly applicable principles and processes of good labour management.' The diffusion of these practices

as best practice does remain problematic and difficult to achieve throughout the tourism and hospitality sector. However, the fact that diffusion of these sorts of practices is potentially limited does not invalidate their utility. Thus, although the 'deluxe' version of best practice may remain out of reach of large numbers of tourism and hospitality organizations, at the very least there should be aspirations to at least go for the 'economy' version to offer a more rewarding and meaningful employment experience for the many who work in the sector.

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